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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/WE, IS, S/GC, AND AF/C

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MNUC](#) [BE](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR BELGIAN DEFENSE MINISTER PIETER DE
CREM'S DECEMBER 15-16 MEETINGS WITH SECDEF, DOS AND
CONGRESS IN WASHINGTON

REF: A. BRUSSELS 1498

[B](#). BRUSSELS 1493

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reason 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Belgian Defense Minister Pieter De Crem has been in office since March 2008 and is one of the United States' strongest friends in the Belgian government. Under his leadership, Belgium has returned its focus to NATO as the orienting factor in its defense policy. Now, Belgium is poised to take a leading role in Europe -- the former Prime Minister, Herman Van Rompuy, has just been named as the first European Council President under the new circumstances of the Lisbon Treaty, and the Belgian government is preparing itself to hold the rotating presidency of the EU Council for the six months beginning July 1, 2010. Embassy Brussels believes that properly motivated, Belgium and its government, including De Crem, can be leaders in mobilizing Europe to assist the United States in meeting two of the key challenges faced by the Transatlantic community -- Afghanistan and Guantanamo. The Embassy has thus urged in repeated meetings with the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister and the Foreign Minister to become more vocal in calling for Europe to ally in its support for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and in European joint efforts in closing Guantanamo. Hopefully, neither coalition politics nor long-simmering tensions between the Flemish and francophone regions and linguistic communities will not distract Belgium from this opportunity. Other opportunities for cooperation exist on Africa policy, nuclear disarmament in Europe and Iran. End Summary.

TAKING A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN EUROPE

[1](#)2. (C) For the past few months, Embassy Brussels has been working to set the stage for a change in Belgium's self-concept as a small, meek country living in the shadow of France and Germany, to a country that can show leadership in Europe in spite of stretched financial and material resources, mainly by becoming more vocal on the need for Europe to support America's new Afghanistan strategy and to assist in the closing of the Guantanamo detention center. This is a theme the Ambassador has been stressing to De Crem in Brussels. De Crem's visit to Washington is a chance for DOD, DOS and Congressional officials to forge a closer personal relationship with De Crem and to foster and encourage this transformation. In fact, of course, the transformation began at home in Belgium in March 2008 when a new government, made up of a motley coalition of Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals and Humanists from both sides of the linguistic border, came to power. The Prime Minister then, and now again with the departure of Van Rompuy to the EU, was Yves Leterme, a Flemish Christian Democrat. Formation of the government was delayed for nearly a year because of difficult issues of power-sharing between the French and Flemish communities, many of which still remain to be solved.

STEPPING UP IN AFGHANISTAN

[1](#)3. (C) Nevertheless, the new Defense Minister, Pieter De Crem, with sometimes grudging support from Leterme and others in the cabinet, reoriented Belgium's defense policy. Where his predecessor had promoted a mainly humanitarian, EU and UN support role, De Crem sought to add a small but reliable Belgian troop commitment with further increases, perhaps to 680, in the offering. Belgians provide security for Kabul airport, operate and maintain six F-16's in Kandahar, run one Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team in Kunduz with a second due to arrive in January, and participate in a German-run PRT. This increase has been achieved against a background of declining resources which have required a thoroughgoing restructuring of the armed forces and recall of peacekeeping troops in Kosovo and Lebanon. The government has also bucked critics inside and out of government who prefer a more pacifist, less NATO-oriented approach and are ever ready to make political hay out of possible casualties. Minister De Crem moreover has reacted positively to suggestions from the Ambassador that he become more vocal in his support of America's Afghanistan strategy as a way to help shore up the support of other European partners. Belgium deserves appreciation and praise for its efforts. Further increases in military

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